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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ABU DHABI 000713

SIPDIS

FOR S, R AND M FROM AMBASSADOR

ALSO FOR NEA,CA AND S/P

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [CASC](#) [CVIS](#) [KPAO](#) [AE](#)

SUBJECT: IMPLEMENTING THE PRESIDENT'S CAIRO SPEECH - WE NEED TO
TACKLE THE VISA ISSUE

REFS: (A) 08 DHAKA 1201
- (B) 08 ABU DHABI 1356

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Classified by Ambassador Richard Olson, reasons 1.4 (b, d).

¶1. (C) The President's speech in Cairo laid out a vision of intensive engagement with the Islamic world, and the Secretary's subsequent memorandum to the president delineated an extensive array of scholarships and exchange programs to implement the vision. Many if not all of these programs depend on Muslims traveling to the United States, which means they need visas. In the view of mission Abu Dhabi (and the UAEG), the biggest strategic impediment to enhanced public engagement is the broken Security Advisory Opinion (SAO) process, which results in significant delays for many UAE citizens. This takes on particular urgency for us as the UAE is preparing to launch a major program of government sponsored University education in the US. I urge that resources be made available, on a government wide basis, to expedite the processing of the visas.

¶2. (C) About one in ten Emirati visa applicants is subject to SAO name checks, usually on the basis of the perceived similarity between an applicant's name (and date and place of birth) and someone else who is believed to have committed a terrorist act. While ten percent may seem a small number, the SAO "hits" are almost entirely on males, so for an Emirati man, the chances are about one in five that an SAO will be needed. Once in the SAO process, opinions can take anywhere from a day or two up to several years. Grounds for expediting are narrow. Ironically, we rarely, if ever, deny a visa on grounds of security. Rather we almost always issue, sometimes after a two year delay. This suggests that the issue is more about resources and management, and less about security per se.

¶3. (C) These delays come at a substantial price to our reputation and public image. (Not least because we are required to say that the delays are attributable to "administrative processing" - for entirely good reasons - which means our delays make us look like incompetents.) They also seriously impact our ability to influence key opinion leaders. Some examples:

-- Juma Al-Majid: this Seventy-eight year old Dubai businessman is a well known philanthropist and founder of society that restores ancient Islamic texts throughout the Arab world. A four month delay in processing his application meant that he missed receiving the Khalil Gibran award from the Arab American Institute.

-- Khalid Gharib: this young Emirati university student was enthusiastically interested in studying in the US and was selected for a MEPI cultural exchange but missed his six month program at a US

university because of a visa delay. This delay had the perverse effect of creating a pall over the program for the rest of the Emirati students.

-- Foreign Minister: Foreign Minister Abdullah bin Zayid complained to Acting Assistant Secretary Jeff Feltman (during his recent visit) and Ambassador about the negative effect on the US public image of the US denying visas for cases of Emiratis needing urgent medical care. (Note: Expediting for humanitarian purposes is allowable, and we noted this to AbZ, but he responded that the frequent delay for escorts effectively cancels the travel, especially for minors.)

-- We could also list many other cases that have had a measurable economic impact (travel of executives from the UAE's booming airline business to buy Boeings) or an impact on our national security (delays in training for UAE service members deploying to Afghanistan in support of coalition efforts).

14. (C) Finally, the UAE has an active scholarship office, with responsibility to encourage young Emiratis to seek university education abroad. After much convincing by the Embassy, it has decided to chance sending 300 plus students per year to American universities. Nothing could be more in line with the President's vision. Yet we are nervous about how the UAEG will react when potentially 30-60 students per year face delays that prevent their travel to the US on a timely basis.

15. (C) Recommendation: I urge two areas of focus: (1) reduce the number of inappropriate SAOs required and (2) handle those that are required more efficiently. The Department should work with our partners to ensure that information in our CLASS database is useful - entries for very common names without date or place of birth information unnecessarily delay legitimate travelers and harm U.S. interests. Agencies need not share entire case files, but should provide information that helps exclude legitimate travelers from the SAO process. As we work to reduce the number of unnecessary SAOs,

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this should allow us to more quickly clear those that are required. While a small number of cases may require lengthy scrutiny, the great majority should be clearable within days or weeks - not the months that are currently required. If resources are needed to help partner agencies clear checks quickly, they should be applied. The USG must view this issue as our foreign interlocutors do: not as a problem where Agency A slows down Agency B, but rather as a Government-wide priority to protect our nation while facilitating legitimate travel.

16. (C) Finally, just to be clear, I do not challenge the need for post 9/11 security procedures, nor do I advocate relaxing any visa issuance standards. I am intensely aware that two of the 9/11 hijackers had visas issued at what is now my mission. I simply advocate mobilization of resources for better management of existing regulations.

OLSON